

The Snowflake of the Service.

BY FRANK R. STOCKTON.



OUR very respectable persons sat around a table in a large and artistically furnished restaurant in one of our great cities. Three of them had been long acquainted with each other, and the fourth was a naval gentleman, apparently a stranger to the hotel and everybody in it. Ten minutes before our story opens he had been wandering about the room looking for a vacant place, and had been invited by the three friends to take a seat at their table. They were now all partaking of unpretending potatoes, and the naval gentleman had already begun to be acquainted with the others.

"Yes, sir," said he, in answer to a question from Mr. Duckworth, "I have sailed the sea to a considerable extent."

its dross. Sometimes Mr. Duckworth made great mistakes in his mental processes and found himself to be entirely wrong, but, as he frequently averred, he would much rather deceive himself than let anyone else do it.

"You may have sailed to a considerable extent," said Mr. Duckworth, "but, considering your age, it is impossible that you have sailed to a great extent."

Mr. Risler, who sat at the naval gentleman's right hand, was fat, and upon his face there was generally a smile of satisfaction and content seldom noticed on the countenance of the lean. He utterly ignored Mr. Duckworth's imputation that the naval gentleman was too young to know much about the sea.

"I am just in the mood," said he, "to



"I HAVE SAILED THE SEA TO A CONSIDERABLE EXTENT."

Mr. Duckworth was a medium-sized man, dressed in smooth black. He had not travelled much, but he had read a good deal. He had a scrutinizing mind, with which he endeavoured, whenever occasion arose, to separate the golden particles of speech from

hear a story about ships and sailors. Don't you know one, sir, that you could tell us?"

"Oh, yes," said the naval gentleman, putting down his glass. "I have had experiences, and I don't mind telling you one of them."

At these words the fourth member of the party, who was a tall man, and sat opposite the naval gentleman, became intensely interested. He pushed his glass aside and leaned forward, his elbows upon the table. For a few moments the naval gentleman gazed reflectively at his empty glass, and Mr. Risler beckoned to a waiter.

"It was about three years ago," said the naval gentleman, "that I was third officer on the United States gunboat *Rapidan*."

Mr. Duckworth slightly knitted his brows. "I thought I knew the names of all the vessels in our navy," said he, "and I don't remember that one of them is named the *Rapidan*."

"Oh, confound your memory!" said Mr. Risler. "It doesn't make any difference whether the vessel was named the *Rapidan* or the *Slow Susan*. It's the story we want."

"We were in latitude 32deg., longitude about 40deg., when an incident occurred which I am going to relate. The *Rapidan* had long been noted as one of the neatest and best appointed, so far as her external appearance went, of all the gunboats in our service, and now that we were returning from a three years' cruise that vessel looked as if it had just been taken out of a handbox. Every bit of brass shone like gold; the painted wood and iron work was as white as snow; the decks looked as if they belonged to ball-rooms; and all the hardwood trimmings were polished as if they had been metal. The officers were attired in their white duck, and the men and non-commissioned officers looked as if they were all trying on new clothes.

"There were reasons for the extra immaculate appearance of the *Rapidan*. We had had a long period of good weather; we were bound for home, and, of course, wanted to look as well as we could; and, besides, as we had ladies on board, every one of us, from the captain down, wished to make our vessel as elegant as possible."

"I did not know that ladies were allowed on board United States men-of-war when they were in commission," interrupted Mr. Duckworth.

"You are right, sir, very right," said the naval gentleman. "As a rule they are not, but this was an exceptional case. We were about three days out from the Azores when we overtook a steamer which had cleared a week before we sailed, and which was also bound for the United States. This vessel was in distress. Her engines had broken down, and she was slowly making her way

back to the Azores under sail. We lay to and boarded her, and found that the captain was quite sure that he could make his way back under canvas, and we thought it was likely enough he could do so, provided bad weather did not set in. There were a few passengers on board, but most of them did not seem to be much troubled about the state of affairs, and were quite willing to go back, especially when they remembered that the owners would be obliged to board and lodge them until they were landed in the United States.

"But two passengers had no such ideas. These were a lady and her daughter, a young woman of twenty or thereabout; and they assured our first officer, who interviewed them, that what they wanted above all else in the world was to be taken off that damaged steamer. The elder lady had not slept a wink since the accident occurred, and they were both in a sadly disturbed, nervous condition. If the captain of the *Rapidan* would take them on board his vessel and carry them home they would be the most grateful of mortals, and if any objection should be made by the Navy Department after they arrived, Mrs. Russell declared that she was connected by marriage with a senator from the south-west, and she was sure that he had influence enough to make everything all right.

"Our captain did not hesitate very long. It would be a shame, even if there should be no storm and no danger, to leave two such delicate and evidently highly-cultured ladies to perish of nervous prostration on board a damaged vessel.

"The ladies were, of course, deeply thankful, and every officer on board our vessel was filled with pleasurable anticipations, for the report had rapidly spread that both ladies were exceedingly well-favoured.

"I shall never forget the delight of Mrs. Russell and her daughter when they stood upon the deck of the *Rapidan* and looked about them. They declared that it seemed to them as if they had entered another world. They had thought the steamer they had left was good enough; but the brightness, the sweetness, the smoothness, and the immaculate white purity of this war-vessel was something they had never dreamed of in connection with anything which floated on the sea.

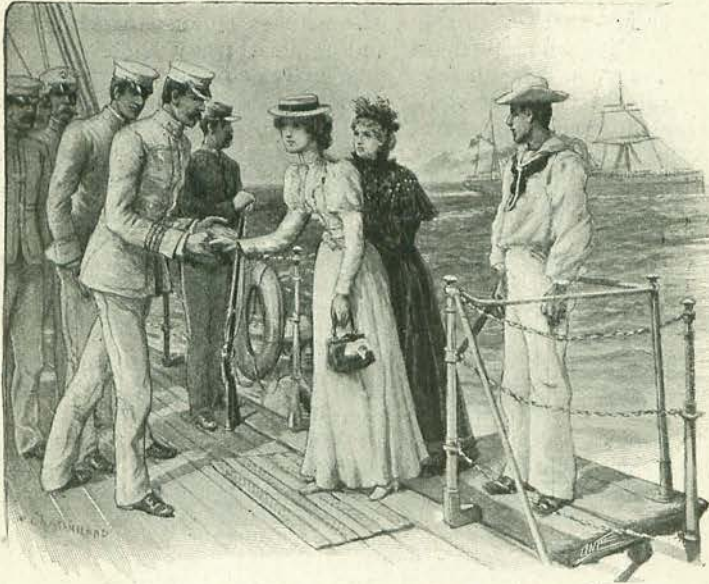
"Their admiration was so great and their expression of it so hearty and continual, that the heart of every man who heard them was filled with pride. Here was a reward for the thought and labour which all of us had ex-

pendent upon the work of making our beloved vessel the snowflake of the service.

"Some very pleasant days followed the arrival of the ladies on board the *Rapidan*; the skies grew brighter, the seas smoother,

that of every ten hours which Miss Russell spent in the society of the officers of the *Rapidan*, six hours and a half were spent with me.

"After breakfast one morning a sail was



"THEY STOOD UPON THE DECK OF THE 'RAPIDAN.'"

and the fresh breezes from the north-west were cooler and more invigorating.

"Miss Emma Russell became as attractive to most of the young officers as our spotless vessel was to her. I use the word spotless," said the naval gentleman, "feeling fully authorized to do so, for on the evening of the arrival of the ladies orders had been given that no smoking of any kind was to be done on deck, for no matter how careful one might be, it was impossible to know where ashes might be blown; and that if anyone wished to sharpen a lead-pencil he must go below and stand over the hatchway of the engine-room. But as I was more nearly her age than any of the others, and as I think there was a certain something in each of us which gave rise to a sympathy which, if not perceptible to anyone else, was quite plain to me, I was a good deal in her company, and lost no opportunity of letting her know the pleasure which this companionship gave me.

"Most of the younger officers seemed to differ with me in regard to my idea of the harmony of my nature with that of the young lady's, and they did what they could to deprive me of my opportunity. But taking it all in all, I think I may fairly say

reported on our weather bow, just appearing above the horizon-line, and almost directly in our course. At this news a mild excitement spread through the vessel, and all available glasses were brought into use, and I am happy to say that mine was accepted by Miss Russell. The excitement rapidly increased, however, when it was found that the distant vessel did not seem to be bound upon any course, for she appeared to be stationary.

"Nearer and nearer we drew to the vessel, and it was not long before many practised eyes on board the *Rapidan* discovered that the craft we were approaching was nothing more than a derelict, abandoned vessel. There were no signals of distress and no signs that people were on board.

"Now, our captain had received orders, on setting out upon his cruise to eastern waters, to destroy all derelicts which he might discover in the Atlantic Ocean, both upon his passage eastward and upon his return. Therefore, when he announced that, as soon as he should discover that this was really an abandoned vessel floating about at the mercy of the wind and of the waves, he would proceed to destroy it according to his orders,

there was great delight on board the *Rapidan*. This would be an incident of the greatest interest, a sort of a battle at sea in which there could be no danger to life or limb, and in which the destruction of property would be an act of humanity.

"The ladies were greatly excited, and at first they did not know whether to be charmed or frightened. Miss Emma thought it was a pity to destroy a great, big, valuable ship, but as it was really such a dangerous obstacle to navigation, she would love above all things to see us sink it. Mrs. Russell at first said that when the work of destruction should actually begin she should go down into her state-room, for the whole thing seemed to her like some sort of an execution. But the more we talked about the matter with her, the more plainly she began to see that the proposed destruction was really a charitable act, and then she took as much interest in what was about to happen as did her daughter.

"We approached within a reasonable distance of the derelict, which was a wooden vessel, a four-masted schooner of American

be an admirable piece of practice for our 5in. guns, but our captain was not of that mind. In the first place, he had sunk a good many derelicts in the course of his naval career by means of his ship's guns, and a repetition of this performance would possess for him no particular novelty or interest; and, besides, it sometimes required a good deal of time and a great many shots to sink even a wooden vessel, and he was afraid that the tremendous reports of our guns, with the jar and the smoke and all the unpleasant accompaniments of our artillery practice, would be extremely annoying to the ladies. Therefore, he thought that it would be a great deal better to ram the abandoned hulk, to break a great hole in her side, and then to retire to a suitable distance and watch her slowly sink. The captain had never rammed and sunk a vessel, and he was greatly pleased at this most favourable opportunity for a piece of naval practice in which he was so much interested.

"When the rest of the officers heard the captain's opinions there were no dissenting voices, and the idea of gun practice was



"THE DERELICT WAS A FOUR-MASTED SCHOONER."

build. We steamed entirely around her, so that our glasses swept her deck. There was nobody on board, and it was plain enough to those who understood the appearance of things that it had been a long time since anybody had been on board of her.

"A consultation was held in regard to the method of the demolition of this derelict. At first most of the officers thought it would

entirely given up. The *Rapidan* had a fine steel prow, and she ought to be able to make a good ram; anyway, it would be a lively piece of fun which none of us had expected.

"As to the ladies, when the matter was fully explained to them they expressed themselves eminently satisfied with the proposed proceedings. Mrs. Russell was sure that the firing of great cannon would certainly give

her a dreadful headache, and Miss Russell was in favour of doing whatever would be the greatest fun. I assured her that ramming would be no end better fun than lying off at a distance and firing our guns.

"The *Rapidan* was now prepared for action—very different action, indeed, from anything she had ever known before. She was not built for a ram, and would probably never have been used in that way in actual battle; but, in this case, the party of the other part being no more than an utterly defenceless wooden vessel, it was thought by all on board that our swift and powerful cruiser might do some very pretty work.

"Mrs. Russell anxiously inquired of the captain if he thought there would be much of a shock, to which he replied that he did not believe that the collision would be felt very much by anybody on our vessel, although it would probably shake up the derelict a good deal. We should strike end on, making a clean cut into the side of the other vessel. That would really be all that we would be obliged to do, unless we chose to wait at a little distance and see the great hulk sink.

"I don't know whether I should like that or not,' said Mrs. Russell. 'Of course, I need not look if I don't want to.'

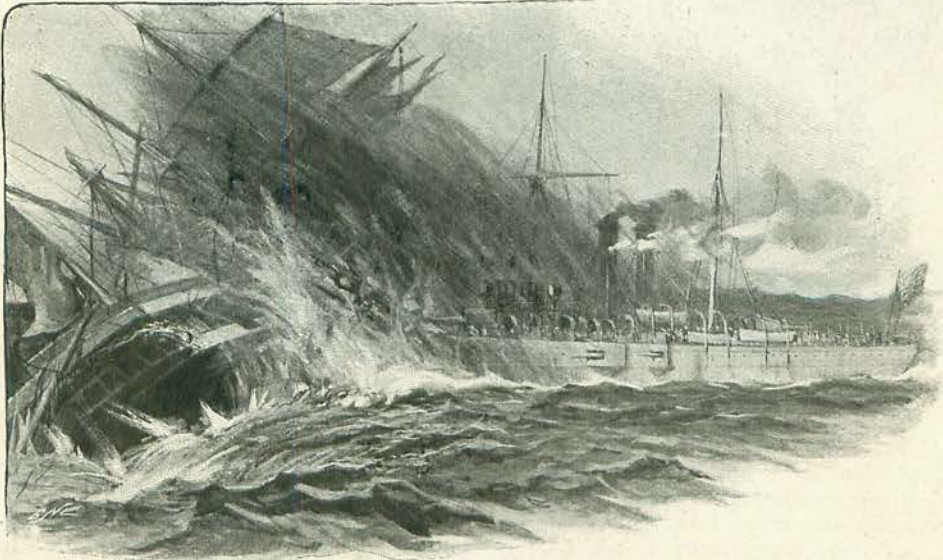
"The preparations for the ramming of the derelict consisted mainly in making everything fast. As the captain had said, the shock was not expected to be great, but still it would not do to leave our crockery and

glass where the pieces might be shaken together and broken, and, of course, the bric-à-brac must be cared for. The glass doors of the book-cases were closed and locked, and the lids were fastened down over all travelling inkstands.

"As we were all anxious for the approaching sport, and were filled with the greatest desire to behold the destruction of a four-masted schooner, as ever was a Roman audience to see a Christian die in the arena, the *Rapidan* was soon ready for her onset.

"We were about a mile from the derelict, and everybody who could possibly do so stood on deck. None of the officers were on the bridge, because if the shock should be more severe than was expected, this elevated position might be a little unsafe. Nearly all of us who were on the decks, where we could enjoy a full view of what was about to happen, were very sorry indeed for the engineers, firemen, and stokers, whose duties made it necessary for them to remain below, where they could see nothing. But this, of course, could not be avoided; we could not make a successful ram unless our engines and furnaces were kept at the highest pitch of working order.

"I stood by Miss Russell on the quarter-deck. Her mother was near by, with the captain and second officer assuring her that she need not be the least nervous, and if she did not care to see the derelict sink, one of them would conduct her below before any actual submergence should begin.



‘THERE WAS A SHOCK, FOLLOWED BY A CRASH.’

"Now the word was given to go ahead at full speed. Our bow was pointed at about the middle of the schooner, which was very sensibly supposed to be the weakest spot in such a long, long vessel. On, on, we went, the derelict growing larger to our eyes in a most supernatural fashion.

"Miss Russell drew a little nearer to me. Her eyes were steadfastly fixed upon the great black vessel ahead of us, and involuntarily she seized my hand. Thrilled with the sudden sense of the manly power of protection, I pressed it closely.

"'If this were a real battle,' said I, 'and that great hulk were crowded with fierce pirates, I would guard with my life this dear girl who has thus shown her trust in me.'

"The towering hulk stood just ahead of us, and in an instant we had struck her, and in that instant my eyes were fixed on my dear Emma.

"There was a shock, followed by a crash, and a grinding, and then all the world dis-

really disappeared, for I still held Emma by the hand. I tried to speak to her, but could not: I had no power of speech. Perhaps she was speaking to me, but certainly I could not hear her. She made a startled move away from me, but I held her fast by the hand. I could feel that she was trembling like a frightened bird.

"I was filled with a sickening horror and despair. Nothing seemed to be the matter with me. I felt no pain; my senses appeared to be in perfect order; I could move my arms and legs; and, moreover, I must be standing by Emma very much as I had been standing when I last looked upon her face. I endeavoured again to speak, but my lips were glued together. I tried to open my eyes, and succeeded so far that I obtained a little glimpse of light, then all was dark again. I thrust my left hand into my side pocket—for some strange reason it was difficult even to do this—and I drew out my handkerchief. With this I rubbed and rubbed and rubbed



"THE FACE WAS AS BROWN AS THE HAT AND THE DRESS."

appeared from my view. A little noise I heard about me, but not much. The ship, officers, men, the masts, deck, ladies, everything had disappeared from my sight, and yet I could not say that everything had

my eyes, until at last I was enabled to open them and look out upon the world.

"What was the sight I saw?"

"Before me, her hand in mine, was the figure of a girl—a statue-like figure—with

features, form, and drapery as well displayed as if it had been the most faithful copy from Nature; but it was of one deep, uniform brown colour. There was no blue in the eyes, no red on the lips, and the face was as brown as the hat and the dress.

"This figure made a sudden movement. I know it was trying to speak or scream. It made a step forward, and in doing so slipped and fell upon its knees on the smooth brown deck. I raised it to its feet and lifted it into a brown deck-chair which stood near by.

"Then I looked about me. Behind the place where Miss Russell had stood was the figure of Mrs. Russell, flat upon the deck where she had fallen. She was perfectly motionless, and presented the appearance of an immense chocolate *éclair*. Near her stood two brown figures, probably the captain and second officer. And then as I turned and looked about me, I found that everything upon the *Rapidan* was of the same sombre brown.

"On deck, the men, recovered from their first surprise, were beginning to move about, rubbing their eyes and mouths, swearing, slipping, falling in every direction. The upper works of the vessel presented an appearance not only of discoloration, but of wreck. The brown smoke-stacks lay overturned upon the upper works; the bridge was a brown wreck, and so far as I could recognise the portions of the vessel above decks, they were shattered and broken.

"As I gazed around upon this wide, wild expanse of brown desolation, the engineers, firemen, and stokers came running up from below. They had opened the steam-valves, and came running up to see what was the matter.

"This company of astonished men, as they hurried on deck to see what had happened, appeared to my eyes like a body of immaculate angels compared to the brown, hustling, swearing, slipping, stumbling crowds on deck. They seemed like messengers of sweetness and light. I saw two of them talking rapidly together. It was the second engineer and a steward. I made my way toward them, slipping down twice.

"'What is the matter?' I gasped. 'What has happened?'

"'Happened?' said the second engineer. 'That rotten old hulk we cut in half was laden entirely *with treacle!*'

"From some of the stewards and a few other men who had been afraid to remain on deck, not knowing what might happen, and who had, therefore, kept themselves in partial

shelter, I learned exactly what had happened. When the *Rapidan*, under full head of steam, struck the derelict, she went entirely through that unfortunate vessel. But at the moment of impact there shot up something like an enormous brown waterspout, which then descended upon both vessels in a veritable cataract of treacle. In a word, every exposed portion of each vessel was instantly treacle-plated.

"I made my way back to Miss Russell, who was now on her feet and endeavouring to walk. She had partially rubbed the treacle from her eyes and mouth. The moment she saw me she screamed and cried, 'Go away! Go away!' She did not recognise me, and probably thought I was the demon who had done it all.

"Most of the people on deck were beginning to see: some with one eye and some with both. Nearly all of them could shout and splutter with their mouths. Mrs. Russell had revived and was sitting up, with the captain rubbing her eyes with one of his shirt-sleeves. He had taken off what had been his white duck jacket.

"Above all, around all, and everywhere was the most dreadful smell of rum. This, of course, was due to the all-pervading treacle. But, as nearly everybody on board was more familiar with the smell of rum than with that of treacle, the circumambient odour was referred to the former liquid.

"I cannot describe the wild and exciting performances of the next few hours. The transformation of the beautiful snowflake of the service into a treacle-besmeared horror was so complete, that for a time we seemed not to know what to do.

"There were symptoms of a general rush to get below in order to exchange our treacle-dripping garments, but the thought of the mess which this procedure would make all over the vessel caused the captain to issue an order—which was transmitted by the firemen and stokers, for the reason that they were possessed of the power of plain speech—to the effect that no man should go below, but that the ladies should be carried to their state-rooms.

"Two stokers, who would have been dirty under any other circumstances, carried Mrs. Russell to the head of the after companion-way, where she was received by two others, who had not yet been contaminated by contact with the decks.

"Her daughter was treated in the same way, and she neither screamed nor struggled, so perfectly satisfied was she with the superior

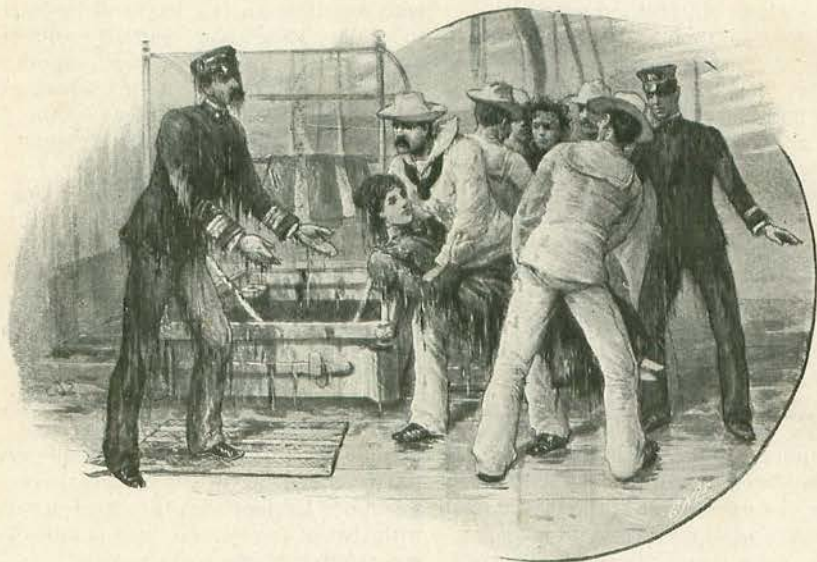
cleanliness of the young firemen who bore her in their arms.

"Then an order was given to start the pumps—I don't remember whether they manned them or whether the donkey engine was in order. Then began such a playing of streams from big-nozzled hose as never was seen on the sea before. The captain wanted no man to spread the contamination of treacle into the interior recesses of his

odour of rum mixed with wash-water, and the other could not endure the smell of paint."

"And what became of the derelict?" asked Mr. Duckworth.

"Few of us gave a thought to her," replied the naval gentleman. "But one of the engineers said that he had seen her two parts sink about a quarter of an hour after the collision."



"SHE NEITHER SCREAMED NOR STRUGGLED."

vessel; and until they had been washed as clean as they could be made the crew were not allowed to go below. And then the hatches and companion-ways were closed and the hose were turned on everything. We squirted and grumbled and growled and smelled rum until night came down upon us.

"For more than a week after that memorable day the crew washed and scoured and holy-stoned and polished and painted. During the whole of that time the two ladies kept their rooms. The one could not abide the

Now the little man, who had been intensely interested, rose from his chair and leaned forward, his hands upon the table. He had not yet spoken a word, but his interest had grown to such an intensity that it had become necessary to relieve it by speech.

"Do you know," said he, "that, considering the smell and everything else, I should say that that affair you have been telling about was a first-class rum punch!"

Mr. Risler immediately ordered four.